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Vietnamese Shrimpers in the Gulf Become Refugees Again

By [MICHAEL COOPER](#)

GULFPORT, Miss., Sept. 9 - As the hurricane raged, Hiep Le pushed with all his might against the cabin door on his father's shrimp boat for hours, trying to keep the wind and water out, and watched as his uncle's boat split in two right next to him.

The roiling waters picked up the trawler carrying Le Nguyen, who is five months pregnant, and tossed it onto a high bank.

And the crew of the Miss Brittney survived by pointing their bow straight into the nearest bank and gunning their engines, desperately racing in place to avoid being thrown into other boats that had sought shelter here in an inland canal.

When the storm passed, at least seven fishermen were dead in the Industrial Waterway, a canal between Gulfport's bayous and back bays that has long sheltered sailors during storms.

Those who survived are still waiting there, in brown waters fouled by sewage and rotten shrimp, their exit to the Gulf of Mexico blocked by sunken boats and a collapsed bridge. They wonder about the future of the already troubled shrimping industry, the livelihood of several thousand Vietnamese families that settled along the Gulf Coast after the [Vietnam](#) War. Some worry that the storm could leave them refugees a second time.

"Even if we could go out, we probably would catch nothing but logs and pieces of wood," said Mr. Le, 26, who was waiting aboard his father's boat on Thursday. "And even if we were to catch shrimp, there are no factories open to sell it at."

If the industry does not rebound soon, some immigrants might be unable to make their boat payments; many are already reeling from the losses at their homes. And language difficulties could make it harder for some to find out about, and get, the temporary help that is available.

Cam Vo, 34, who rode out the hurricane aboard the Sea Lion with her husband, Dap Dang, and their 5-year-old daughter, Anne, said the storm destroyed their house.

"When we came home, our house was gone, so we are living with our uncle," said Ms. Vo, whose husband has been shrimping in [Mississippi](#) for 20 years. "Our car is gone, too. We don't know what to do."

The Vietnamese began arriving here during the Vietnam War, and came in much larger

numbers when it ended. Many who had been fishermen settled along the Gulf Coast so they could ply the one trade they knew. Some found the sultry, sticky Southern climate familiar.

Signs of their success are evident here in the Industrial Waterway, where shrimp boats with names like the "Patty Ann" and the "Miss Angela" are moored next to boats with names like "Capt. Hiep Phu III" and "Viet Pride."

The concerns of shrimpers here were echoed across the Gulf Coast, from [Louisiana](#), where the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries estimates that the fishing industry's losses could blow a \$1.6 billion hole in the state's economy over the next year, to small towns like Bayou La Batre, Ala., whose economy centers on the seafood industry.

Shrimping has always been a hard life, but it has been especially hard in recent years. Rising diesel fuel prices and cheap farm-raised shrimp from Asia have taken a toll. Fishermen say things were just beginning to get better this year after the United States began imposing tariffs on many Asian imports.

"Some of these people were hurting," said Henry Barnes, a city councilman in Bayou La Batre. "Now they're ruined."

Here in Gulfport, more than a hundred members of the crews of the shrimp boats, mostly Vietnamese immigrants, stayed with their boats, even as conditions on the canal worsened and the smell grew riper. Some were hoping the path to the sea would soon be cleared. Others said that their boats were all they had, or that they had been told by their captains to stay with the boats. The Coast Guard began running missions through the canal to get food and water to the stranded shrimpers. And while many shrimpers have left, quite a few remain on their boats.

"Do you need some water?" [Chad](#) Eberhart, a machinery technician third class, shouted as a Coast Guard Boston Whaler navigated sunken boats to get to the trawler where Ms. Nguyen, the pregnant woman, and her husband, Cho, sought shelter after their boat was tossed onto the bank, where it still hangs precariously. "How's the baby?"

"Good," Ms. Nguyen said, patting her belly and signaling that she was carrying twins. She and her husband gladly accepted bottles of water and meals-ready-to-eat from the Coast Guard, and said they hoped to have their boat re-floated next week.

Paul Cormier, a boatswain's mate first class, pointed to tall pines that line the canal. The bark was rubbed off the trunks in spots 15 to 20 feet high by the hulls of shrimp boats that were lifted during the storm. "Can you imagine it?" Mr. Cormier asked. "Can you imagine what it must have been like?"

Farther down the canal, Mr. Le recounted the struggle he and his father had as they rode out the hurricane on their boat, which was tethered to his uncle's boat and a third boat during the storm. They worked to keep the power on, and the pumps working, as they were rocked by wind and waves. Then they were smashed into his uncle's boat and ripped it in two; his uncle was able to climb aboard his boat.

"I could tell my dad was scared," Mr. Le said. "He probably wouldn't admit it."

Campbell Robertson contributed reporting from Bayou La Batre, Ala., for this article, and Jeremy Alford from Baton Rouge, La.